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Voices of the Wandering

Grace Manning

College of the Holy Cross, gracedmanning@gmail.com

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VOICES OF THE WANDERING

By

Grace Manning

Class of 2021

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of

The English Department at The College of the Holy Cross

Under the Advisement of

Professor Oliver de la Paz

With

Professor Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

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In *Voices of the Wandering*, Grace Manning explores the concept of belonging through the disconnect that exists when one's home isn't defined by structure or established in childhood, but rather a by constantly changing and evolving ideal. Manning's speaker draws inspiration and comfort from others who are living between countries and continents, using their voices and emotions to try and understand her own. South and West African experiences investigate the confusion and suffering that is colonialism, from blame, to hurt, to lifelong guilt, she introduces the perspectives of those on either side of the racial wall built during Apartheid. Using French to highlight language as a factor that has the power both to unite and to ostracize, the speaker ultimately allows for a duality of identity, intrinsic to a nomadic lifestyle. From the heat and surprise of Cameroon, to a France rocked by violence, to the wild Ireland of her childhood, Manning introduces a self that is shaped by an expatriate, and by a transient, existence.

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I

this truth

sandra took me to the market
on a saturday in late november
the air was still summer

i spent nights dreaming of handfuls of ice
slipped into pockets our hands
smelled like fish for hours the street wavered

through heat delirious eyes
thought i could feel mine
liquify

i spent days waiting for an orb sun
to move behind imaginary clouds
my mind played tricks

i knew what it was like
for the first time
to be afraid

when i forgot to buy water
thought constantly
about where i could get it next

the sky
seemed closer
every day

she told me to ask about chickens
we needed four
and the boy selling them

laughed
when i asked
told me,

tu les tues comme ça
and wrung the neck
of the one he held

the others clambered in wire baskets
i looked for something
in frantic eyes

his friend got me a wheelbarrow
showed me the best tomatoes
crushed and seeping

the slick *piments* dangled
in bunches above the butcher
he flung entrails at hairless dogs

his face covered in raised freckle blood
drying
thrust fish into my arms

his sister
was scaling them
she stood on a shimmering mound

i told her i was from america
she laughed deep in her throat
and she told me i was french

pfffft she whistled through her teeth

les americaines ne viennent pas en Afrique.

i came home

to find it tethered to the jagged edge
of a broken pipe

it dragged a little
bleated more softly than it would

in the grey heat haze hours of morning
when the papaya tree filled

with tiny green birds their nests
swollen woven tumors hanging

from weakening branches their sound
the rolling of thousands of stones

would be only a part
of the reawakening

it lived there
for three weeks

swatting flies hovering around its patchy hair
scaring little girls who ran around corners

eating leftover *batons de manioc* and
eru and *fufu* and whining

before the morning could erupt
stirring dust

into eye sockets and settle
tacky hot over the city

it was a gift
from a man who couldn't pay his doctor in francs

and so paid in this goat
and three bags of sugarcane

which we chewed up sucked out
swallowed and spat

wads of woody pulp
into the gutter across the street

already choked with debris from the last rain
and then we ate it

on a sunday i remember
they had cut the lights

and we ate in the dark
the table still smelled like blood

and animal and the heat
that won't let anything

go.

funeral sacrifice

it was an immaculate violence
with holiness in its horror
the utmost care

we were invited

stepped barefoot between sunburnt grass
stamped up and down
to shake off biting ants

the man beside me whispered

regardez

when i looked away
from the blessing
the touching of shoulders

palms up to impossibly blue sky
the pressing of lips
to brittle hair

the thanks passed between bent heads

the pig's eyes were whites
rolled back so far they became alien
silence in this circle

did not move to get away
did not understand
the machete wink

until it screamed
and i remembered
a fox scream

one night made me sit
bolt upright in bed
eyes open open open

the ache when i closed them again
so like a child's scream
it made me panic paralyzed

my brain too deep inside a dream
to hear the *creature*
in the cry

under half baked afternoon sun
i realized the red roads weren't red
not really

not red like this
not deep sloughed off
of trembling body

the man beside me whispered
ma soeur
dieu est là.

le peuple du forêt

sometime before the chimpanzees
started their early morning calls

and the trees
fell from the heavens

onto the forest
muted like bodies

he told me
they were looking for a world that was gone

during the night
left looking back

bewilderment slashed across their faces
the violence of it too soft to be noticed

the violence of it
was not at a distance i could know it

if i wanted too
if i held the weight of that freedom

if i saw that the leaves here
were *Lion d'Or*

empty red whiskey sachets
ground into the lobes of this river

shuffled under dragging feet
that once walked miles to find elephant drinking holes

deep in the jungle
that ran with lowland gorillas and grieved for their dead

for weeks
that sadness was strength for eyes

that never saw sky
above all those frothing trees

how can they grieve now
that the sky is *right there*

now that i can see it too
even if i don't know what it was like not to
even if i cannot ever know

now that the forest is silent and stripped
now that time is still

and the only movement is that of weary notes
passing between hands.

little faces

heat that makes my fingers heavy
the ones they strain to hold

clamber at me
little faces smeared in sugar

dimpled with crumbs
want to touch me all over and
for once

i let them

exploring my face like it will help them
know me

understand why i am here
when even i

cannot begin to

heavy lidded eyes
no reason to be searching open

caught between the oblivion
of dreams cradled by night

and the push

to be children of the day
their blue startles me

and zippers hanging off of uniforms
stained pink with dust clouds

puffed white
sugared with chalk showers

they blow
and can't see the shimmer of it

in afternoon light
staining copper roofs

and i wish fingers
could feel this

could reach for slipping sun
and catch it before it sidles

behind watching mountains
before it casts little faces

in this palm warm clay.

the man on the corner selling avocados

has a face like the whorled creased roots
of an ancient tree

waits only for the sun as it creeps across
the line of plump greens and browns

back and forth
and i

standing on the painted rock
on the edge of the city

have never known change like this
have never been more terrified of

myself
altered by hills frilled in palm

sloping and pregnant with plantain and papaya
burst with a sunset

red and dripping to match roads
that curl off into jungle

that slice deep into wild

i remember when slow moving
smoke tendrils

slipping between my teeth
made my heart stop

when whisper of sand warm lizard across my feet
hum of the forest

brought more
than the clamber of feathering clouds

swollen with rain.

in a taxi cab

looking back

to when dusty streets
bathed in end of a lifetime light

thrummed under empty skies
and how i felt

realized smoke choked wind
through cracked glass

and slivers of mountains
and hot newspaper from strange hand

and the smell when drenched forest
meets baked land

that hiss you can hear
under everything else

how it could be everything to me
and how i could let it

how slick coins passed
under blood warm rain

watching this flood from
under hanging banana leaves

all these bodies pressed
under the weight of a slipping mountain

lost in streets carved into hills
rivulets of red road meeting heels

running to run
running

to get to where i have been
waiting all this time.

portrait

i was bizarrely
startlingly

out of place
like i always was

here
i had gotten used to being noticed

secretly salivated
over invisibility

secretly ached
for obscurity

irrationally
consumingly

i envied the women
draped in folds

their slipping
into an uneasy existence

when i feel like
i am always forcing

fighting
my own

their hands clasp reflect
the heat

that makes the peppers glisten
enormous melons

waver mirages
strewn over packed ground

trampled under creased feet
la tête?

he asked me and i turned to see
blushed flesh thick rubber

it sat and waited and listened
les oreilles

i answered and they were passed
from his hands to mine

the strength in his movements
his pale palms veined with blood

it was all people and shouting and thrusting
and tossing of burlap bags to burst

powdered *manioc* settling
kids ran in it

tossed it in the air like snow
the closest they would get

in all the brown green
in all the hovering

red mist

one boy kicked a three legged dog
under the butcher table

his snout glued to the wood
his tongue desperately seeking out

the life dregs
oozing between splinters.

II

thirst

there's a place
in the gorse-choked Kerry mountains

where my uncle said
you could drink the water

that it was better than anything
anywhere

else

we were wild there
scaled rocks slick with moss

fell into guinness lakes
frothed with foam

caramel colored
we sat

in high backed reed patches
to rest

to watch the rain batter
the field in front of us

but never get close enough

towhead hair left spiderweb
strands on tree branches

clumped with fleece
we crouched

on bristled banks and drank
clung onto boulders

hung over waterfalls
until our mouths hurt

novocain numbness
made our cheeks swell

sometimes we ate wild garlic
or slurped

the sticky sweet
from honeysuckle

we wouldn't see another person
in all that big empty

under all that sky
and those wind shorn mountains

hollows left by the ones
who made walls

and crumbling houses seeping into land
felt lonely

in the way that makes your lungs
swell in your chest

a kind of loneliness
you can spend your whole life

searching for.

my sister and i

used to rescue baby birds
walked them far

from the melting sun seared road
in the pouches of our shirts

they lived only hours
tucked in shoeboxes under our beds

shrieking horribly into the night
their beaks

cavernous
we dripped

eye droppers of warm water
couldn't remember

what cold water *felt* like
what it *tasted* like back then

thought of metal
under my tongue

made me miss the things
i couldn't remember

couldn't will into that place
behind my eyes

where they live and hover and wait
suspended

we were kept awake
so long

by the want
of tiniest bodies

that when they went quiet
i was too tired to notice

like that time we were sitting
under half moon

dune shadows
and she pointed

the darkness
unmistakably

the speed of it
the power

made its way down the coast
we ran after it

breathless burning chest
high on the stomach pit fear

of this thing
living so easily

in a troubled world.

cold blood

Imagination, of course, can open any door - turn the key and let terror walk right in.
— Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

my little sister slept in the suitcase
or maybe in the dresser drawer

because she was the smallest
it was logical

and my parents neglected
to mention her to the nuns

we ate with them
when they got up with the early grey sun

stale toast and chocolate in the bare kitchen
black instant coffee

we had to be back before curfew
or if we weren't

drunk on Italian wine
swaying into each other

my parents snuck us back
in through the shadowed courtyard

we slept heavy
those nights

my hand wandering
into my sister's face

bumpy and scabbed
she had skidded on it

running up spanish steps
to scatter pigeons

i could almost forget how unhappy i was
back then

when the cloth wrapped clothespin dolls
in a drawstring bag under my pillow

were my parents' hope
more than my own

that all the insidious things
like the shell mirror

and the plastic cookie monster mug
wouldn't empty me

like they did sometimes
when i was ten

that i wouldn't spend hours
thinking about in cold blood

thatfamilymurderedthatfamilymurderedthatfamilymurderedthatfamilymurdered

that

family

murdered

i read it three times in a week
could remember every detail

even if i couldn't remember the last time
that i closed my eyes

even if i knew
i could never keep it

apple blossom pale gold
dripping fever dreams

warm ice cream licked off
nickel burned wrist

even if i knew
i could never live in that

without sitting
in this almost dark

breath caught
somewhere above my ribs

mind winking
like a stoplight

when there are
no stars.

tout est pardonné

they said
we were all charlie

in the weeks after
we went to the marches

my dad
put my sister on his shoulders

someone said
la petite

il faut que vous voyez
said when asked

on pleure pourquoi?
that some violence

comes from god
that some violence

is holy

marches
where the prophet cried in all our hands

bled neon green and cartoon puffed
on our coats

muhammed assuring us everything
everything

is forgiven
lifted up where for once

the silence was understood
where holding hands meant

we were together
not against but inside

this grief
and there is something about grieving

with thousands
that made me want to forgive

him
even when i wasn't sure yet

that he had done anything wrong
even when i would never be sure

but i would have
this push on my ribs

this ocean splayed distance
and it made me think that

blame
is the most dangerous

animal.

mal de débarquement

when my sister left her home
she stopped eating

since everything
everything

made her sick
and when I hugged her

it was all hollow spaces
and creaking wind through

smooth bone
her heart protruded convex

and she wrote eulogies to the place
she lost

in thick lines big letters paper scraps
left all over

sucked her thumb again
the flat right one always wrinkled

it remembered her mouth
in a way that was comforting

when nothing else
was

and I think she was grieving
that grief

when you're small
is strange

your mind loses your body
for a while and when it catches up

it forgets
what comes first

and I was like her too
before

and it reminded me
of when we played airplane

and her body hung over mine
when she slipped off

and stood up to go again
and only I saw her distorted arm

had to widen horror eyes
for her to know the chaos

under blade thin skin
her mind too far behind

to recognize
the brokenness.

hunger

to wish you didn't see death
the first time

when it was hot and animal
and slipped down the street

crept in through the window
left open

in fever damp summer
in clawing dark

in sleep
or in the almost light

when you thought of it
when it came to empty you

before the swell of flesh
this thick softness

unwinding lazily
above the ground

seemed monstrous
the great head turned

your first time seeing something
so *bloodless*

stained stone
footprints rumored

of unspeakable crime
not of this

particular
human

hunger.

if i am from here

i am in ireland
the smell is close and damp

its land belly distended
lies like a small beached animal

breathes peat smoke
sweet enough to flavor

a low sky

my childhood
is drunk

on savage wind
on water

that could reach up cliffs
that could crawl over earth

could fling chunks of foam
flecked with salt saliva

i was filled
with shrugged off dirt

gulps of air
laced with rain

i was fed
out a car window

to tempt the wild

this home
was beer breath warmed

in loud like comfort
this time

i remember
quieter woods

but i remember leaving
most

the loss of something
the gain of something

else

but i am followed
or maybe i am lived in

for a while
by a place that is not mine

does not want to be
like i want it to

and i wonder
sometimes

if i am allowed
to miss it

this much.

anthem

in this crowded room
i thought

i could sing an anthem
like it belonged to me

because i could *feel* it
in my body

like a hum
in my throat

before it is even
music

because i was dressed
like a small stunted man

was so proud
i didn't take the blazer off

or the tie
even when i was home

and america was the whole sun
again

and the anthem was
pretending

and my *feeling*
was like a trick

of the eye
except of my arms and legs

and stomach
i was betrayed

not beloved
by this country

and america
was summer it was

driving across the border
skin sucking off leather

wind roaring
there was no relief

from tacky heat
but it was america

i watched my mom
her whole being

as it breathed out
let something go

i wished i could
breathe these places

in and
out

like she could.

diagnosis

my bitterness is smaller
i think

it shrunk and it can
float now

i am careful
because it looks like

proof that an empty capsule
pink placebo dust

is medicine to some
minds

i am careful
not to believe it

when i was angry at you
for taking things from me

and people
when i thought

about being
the same

but so much
younger and everything was

strange but it
kept happening

anyway and i didn't know
my mind could be still

and i was angry
because i thought you knew

and she is so much like me
it seems unforgivable

she walks through
the world

with the same fierce blue
trembling

like there is a screen
and behind it is

just another world
thin enough

to walk through.

untouchable

selling sunflowers
sliced off stalks

glowed in the dark
of this almost day

cut through heat and air
so choked with people

i could taste the human
this frenzied grip on life

he held my hand
for a moment

and i was afraid
of its warmth

felt like i might somehow
see myself there

beside him
with seared eyelids hanging
this boy

made me feel like
i might be buried there

under towers of leaves
waiting to be spices

under men who
grabbed pulled thrust threw

rainbow tarps caught
indian sun in hammocks

let it pool there instead
of on all our waiting faces.

the airport in abu dhabi made me feel like a crab

like the ones we used to
scoop from the sand

clumsy fingers
pulled off legs by mistake

left it disfigured
we watched it limp around

the bottom of a plastic bucket
forgot about it

in the blue of late summer
remembered it

when the water was boiled
and cooled

when the crab was a mound
in a bucket groove again

that was how it was to be looked at
to be *examined*

to be the object of seeing
i struggled under several bags

where is your hijab? he demanded
as i sweated in still air and fluorescent lights

i remembered it was better
not to look at him

someone had told me that
once i think

shaking my head i pushed forward
waited for a hand to turn me

i didn't see one woman
in all those filled spaces

couldn't figure out
why that made me afraid

i looked at the cracked floor
kept my head a little lower

my eyes down
fought the alien urge

to cover my head hair face
thought about the crab

curled and curved
in submission

to my accidental cruelty
knew i wouldn't be able to hide

this me
for a very long time.

this place

ok i tell myself
ok
you are here

kneel down for a minute crouch if you need to
in warm body waves pushing

touch wood
rougher here it is like you

unfinished

touch ground
hold the hand of the woman next to you

forget the offer is strange
realize it is comforting

realize she can hear the newborn
in your throat

the bare fragility the exposure
smell pollen soaked flowers it is clean

here

smell dust blown sun baked bricks glow orange
like green on brown like sunrise

over raped city
urging buildings to struggle upwards sit up dig out

fight again this war
i can see
in all the eyes under all the feet

here

i am not hardened
and i do not know how to be anything else

do not know yet
that this absence of closed off spaces

this wanting
this naked hunger

doesn't have to make me weak.

III

superior

this is what it is
he says

to think they are better
in every way

of the mind body
soul

to think
that human

is not *my* human
their god

lives here
in a flooded city

watches houses drown
under their own yellowing hills

shrugs says
construits trop bas

watches death as it is now
a child

they say *français*
and we worship their country

we trade ourselves for it
die slowly

under vibrating bellies
of this greatest human feat

in the cold that is only found
higher than breath

and still maybe we think this is
achievement

at last we think
we have arrived

in our own land
even in death

even in too soon death
that laughs at our promise

they say *camerounais*
his voice is still

and we cannot see
our reflections

in this mirror
they hold.

do we have an identity? that is the question

forgetting who we are
he says

is not me forgetting
or her forgetting

it is the forgetting
of a generation

throw of his arms
and the lizards flinch

we are sitting under an overhang
watching the bumpy grey

of the abandoned airstrip
the waste fires murmur

on the other side of the mountain
the papaya tree dangles

hot and heavy and sweet
the one in my hand

mimics the curved spine
of an infant

even its warmth
its soft strange life

spoon presses into flesh
rests forgotten

the birds cluster
they are loudest in the mornings

insistent at the thinly barred
windows

his hands rest on his work
obscure it

the dust clouds
of someone coming

someone going
meet slow smoke

over the valley
and his sadness

on his breath
and

that is all
he speaks

ask where we come from
he says

when we have only ever
lived here

tell me a thief
more cruel and

accomplished
tell me a people

who can know this
when even their

selves
their sleep drunk essence

are still buried somewhere
in this valley

think of all the bones
and souls

he tells me
think of all the faces.

how did you experience apartheid?

i was guilty
she says

because of my whiteness
because for so long

i didn't even know it
from blackness

we played in
the same dirt

spent days in pursuit
of the same joy

our fathers worked hard
in dust clambering flies

woke in dark and slept through
the high sun hours

when clear blue and stillness
meant death

my mothers were two
white from birth

and black afterwards
taught me to speak

like she did with her family
taught me to cook

her husband showed me
how to be soft and silent

how to be peace
on the back of an animal

one thousand times stronger
than myself

to feel its blood stretch through

its body to feel its heartbeat

on a damp neck under my palms
to know it

i am proud
now

she says
her words her mouth are certain

to be south african
i can allow myself this much

when before
my pride had a price

too high to admit

and it has taken me
a long time

to learn how to carry
this.

how is this country a part of you?

anger and confusion
and hurt and guilt

she says
that is so deep its roots are

forever
and sometimes i wonder

at it
that it can grow

even in the dry season
when you can see the wind

as it picks up the road
and coats the cars and the people

and nothing is clean
for long

it is painted with this land
but there is hope and grace

there is human kindness
here too

we are all these things
and i wonder

that i could learn
from someone

who looks like me
and could think i know things

now
that i was so deep inside

i thought this particular
guilt lives only here

that this land
is calculated divide

like nowhere else
that i had to leave

what i knew
to see that this guilt is not

only ours to dig out
scratch out of earth

uncover with
trembling hands

its
shallow grave.

do you see your country the same way?

it is still our home
he says

i don't need much
convincing his

children wear coats
for the first time

exchange reluctantly
cities charged

electric with heat
for this quiet

crowd of mountains
emptied into fields

too gorged
to grow like

we want them
to

shoes for school
they are bewildered

here
he says

it is our people
our opportunity

and
our challenge

his childhood was a
kind of dying

of a country
with all the writhing

and grasping of an
evil that saw

its own death
but fought it

anyway
the convulsions of land

that meant nothing
was safe

not even ground
he was taught to suspect

solid floors
taught to believe that

even this country
this whole

anchored by earth and water
can be shaken

can be severed and
sewn back up

to remind of the joy
the hope the promise

in the trembling glass
of these

once broken things.

do you consider yourself to be african?

i am an african
he speaks

and i do not find
hesitation

even buried
in his words

only maybe a
kind of will

he explains

all our family is there
our life our customs

our language
is african

only we are tasked with this
it is our work

our hurt and
our home

maybe we do not look back
as far as we can

to know this is not
enough

my parents fought
against

but some fought
for

and we are all
in the comfort of our

place and time
it is the horrors

we will look at
the times we were

afraid
of a change so great

the times we went hungry
or cold

the times we heard
war

and wondered if
there could be better

than this
wondered if

change meant
us

instead of
them.

Notes

On superior and do we have an identity? that is the question

I spoke with Professor Ambroise Kom, a black Cameroonian man who is considered by many to be primarily a writer and a journalist but considered by himself to be an educator. He was a friend, a mentor and a teacher during my time in Yaoundé, Cameroon. One of his many passions is education surrounding colonialism. In his own words, “The fundamental issue with colonialism is its superiority complex. Colonizers believe that they are humanly, culturally, spiritually, intellectually superior to the colonized. From that standpoint, colonized people must forget their identity, their values and their history to embrace those of the colonizers.”

On how did you experience apartheid? and how is this country a part of you?

I interviewed Pam Volpert, a white South African woman who left her country when her three children were small and moved to Ireland. She now lives in Jersey in the Channel Islands. After struggling with guilt from apartheid all her life, she now believes, “We still face many challenges but as a nation we are strong, willing and able to move forward. We ask forgiveness for our past and we acknowledge that we still haven’t got it perfect. We are proud of many fellow South Africans (Mandela, Barnard, Semenya ...) and proudly South African.”

On do you see your country the same way? and do you consider yourself to be african?

I interviewed Henri Louw, a white, South African man who grew up during Apartheid and left shortly after with his family to live abroad. In his own words, “my family traces its origins back to 1657, as part of the Dutch settlement founded in what is now Cape Town. I grew up in a small mining town on the eastern side of Johannesburg. I am an African. Born in 1980, my early childhood years were in the dying days of the Apartheid regime.”